

# Women in Labor

by Mari Helen York

My great grandmother, Emma, recited poems.  
 She brought me yellow daffodils when I was born.  
 She could sew anything, predict the sex of your child  
 using a piece of string through the eye of a needle  
 stuck into an eraser. She would make Afghans.  
 Sometimes we give love by building,  
 keeping those we care about warm with our labor.

The only picture I have of her  
 she is trying to hold me still in her lap and show me  
 a snowman, but I am more interested in motion.  
 She married a man who fixed everything—a blacksmith  
 welder with a broken mold. Sometimes when I'm  
 running past their old house, I see their conversations:  
 She lovely dark hair and bright red dresses quoting  
 Robert Louis Stevenson, hugging everyone.  
 He is listening patiently, smiling and talking  
 of tools and building with affection.

My grandmother, Virginia, likes to remodel.  
 She changed the living room from the sea-foam green walls  
 shag carpet to an oriental tea house with dark paneling.  
 The kitchen went from 1960's orange, yellow and green  
 Now Country Fresh blue and white with ducks, flowers and dishes.  
 She learned how to hammer and screw, how to saw and wallpaper.  
 She believes in defiance as a positive family value.  
 She worked outside the home, sometimes two jobs;  
 she learned to drive when she was sixty-five  
 despite being told she couldn't.  
 When someone tells my grandmother no,  
 it is an open invitation to a challenge.  
 She would walk door to door selling Avon;  
 I would draw on her order forms; we had matching coats,  
 brown suede with fake fur trim. Only when I ask  
 does she tell me, "I wrote poems too."

It was always my mother, Nancy, who fixed everything.  
 She's an electrician, a carpenter, a painter, a plumber.  
 She sings with a hammer and a drill.  
 My mother and my grandmother share  
 articles from *Better Homes and Gardens*, watch HGTV,  
 remodel and repaint the past.  
 My mother coveted a ladder,  
 blue with yellow trim for its sturdy  
 industrial design—my grandmother didn't

wait for the sale, she bought it for her anyway.  
This is how they communicate:  
how much lumber is needed for the shelves?  
What fixtures are best for rehabbing the old house?  
When my grandmother had her stroke,  
My mother fixed everything.  
They dance my grandmother into her bed at night,  
My mother holds the gait belt while grandmother walks.  
My grandmother kisses her and pats her on the cheek;  
The language changes, but the roles do not.

In my dreams, I watch them put up paneling,  
paint windows, the base trim. I sit in stacks of wood  
tired from running through the hardware store,  
tired of lugging wall paper books, deciding on a sample.  
Every once in a while, I am trusted with some remodeling:  
repainting the sink, changing the fixtures on the tub.  
My love of hardware comes from my mother,  
my love of language, deeper still.  
The tool box may be pink, the color scheme yellow,  
we can still fix the ring on the toilet, still use the staple gun.